

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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TAGS: ELAB, PFOR, SA

SUBJ: EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS FOR WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

REF: (A) DHAHRAN 187, (B) DHAHRAN 271

1. THE SAG'S CURRENT SQUEEZE ON COMPANIES EMPLOYING WOMEN
REFTELS IS BY NO MEANS LIMITED TO THE EASTERN PROVINCE,
THOUGH IT DOES SEEM TO BE ENFORCED MORE RIGOROUSLY
THERE. COMPANIES IN THE RIYADH AND JIDDA AREAS HAVE ALSO
TOLD US OF RECENT HARASSING VISITS BY MINISTRY OF LABOR
OR INTERIOR OFFICIALS, DURING WHICH WOMEN EMPLOYEES
HAVE BEEN QUESTIONED OR OTHERWISE INTIMIDATED, AND
EMPLOYERS WARNED TO REGULARIZE THE STATUS OF ALL THEIR
FEMALE EMPLOYEES. WE KNOW, HOWEVER, OF NO LARGE-SCALE
LAYOFFS BY EMPLOYERS TO DATE OUTSIDE OF EASTERN PROVINCE.

2. MOST OF THE WOMEN WHOSE EMPLOYMENT IS CURRENTLY
BEING THREATENED ARE UNFORTUNATELY WORKING HERE IN
CONTRAVIENNTION OF SAUDI LAW OR REGULATION. VERY FEW OF
THEM HAVE WORK PERMITS, BECAUSE SAUDI PRACTICE HAS BEEN
NOT TO RESPOND TO APPLICATIONS FOR PERMITS FROM WOMEN
IN PROFESSIONS OTHER THAN TEACHING, SOCIAL WORK OR HEALTH
CARE. THE ONLY STATEMENT OF SAG POLICY IN THIS RESPECT
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IS THE PROVISION OF THE LABOR LAW WHICH STATES THAT MEN
AND WOMEN MUST NOT "COMINGLE" AT WORK, THIS APPEARS TO
HAVE BEEN INTERPRETED AS PROHIBITING WIDESPREAD OFFICIAL
SANCTION OF WOMEN WORKING IN FIELDS OTHER THAN THOSE
MENTIONED ABOVE. EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN OTHER FIELDS,
PRINCIPALLY OFFICE AND SECRETARIAL JOBS, HAS BEEN WINKED
AT BUT NOT OFFICIALLY ACCEPTED. AS VISAS CANNOT BE

OBTAINED UNLESS APPLICANT HAS SPONSOR AND JOB IN SAUDI ARABIA, AND LATTER REQUIRES WORK PERMIT, SAG POLICY ALSO DISCOURSES SINGLE WOMEN FROM COMING HERE TO WORK IN ANY BUT THE FEW APPROVED PROFESSIONS.

3. THE SAG'S CURRENT SQUEEZE IS NOT UNPRECEDENTED; THE AUTHORITIES PERIODICALLY HASSLE COMPANIES EMPLOYING WOMEN WITHOUT THE PROPER PERMITS. BUT THESE ARE USUALLY SPOT CHECKS RATHER THAN IN THE NATURE OF A CONCERTED EFFORT, AS THE PRESENT OUTBREAK OF CASES SEEMS TO CONSTITUTE. WE CAN ONLY SPECULATE ON THE IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF THE CURRENT CAMPAIGN, BUT FIND INDICATIONS THAT IT COMES FROM THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR, EVEN THOUGH THE HARASSMENT ON OCCASION IS CARRIED OUT BY THE MINISTRY OF LABOR. WE SHOULD UNDERLINE THAT SAG IS NOT CLAMPING DOWN SOLELY ON ILLEGAL EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN - THERE IS A NATION-WIDE EFFORT UNDERWAY TO ENFORCE THE LABOR REGULATIONS. MOST OF THIS EFFORT IS DIRECTED AGAINST YEMENIS AND OTHER IMMIGRANTS WHO ARE WORKING HERE IN CONTRAVENTION OF THEIR VISA CONDITIONS (A POLICY WHICH, WE MIGHT ADD, HAS BEEN URGED ON THE SAG INTER ALIA BY MANPOWER AND ECONOMIC CONSULTANTS). THE PREVIOUS SAG PRACTICE OF IGNORING THE DOUBTFUL STATUS OF MANY WOMEN EMPLOYEES HAS EVIDENTLY FALLEN VICTIM - AT LEAST TEMPORILY - TO THIS EFFORT, ASIDE FROM WHATEVER PUSH MAY HAVE BEEN GIVEN BY THE CONSERVATIVES IN THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR OR ELSEWHERE.

4. CONSERVATIVE INFLUENCE IN SAUDI ARABIA (ON THIS AND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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OTHER ISSUES) CONTINUES TO BE VERY STRONG - IN WHAT OTHER COUNTRY DOES THE HEAD OF STATE MEET ON A WEEKLY BASIS WITH THE HEADS OF THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY? BUT IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO ASSUME THAT IT IS ONLY THE COUNTRY'S RETROGRADE OR REACTIONARY ELEMENTS WHICH COLOR THE GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE. PATERNALISTIC AND PROTECTIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN ARE ENDEMIC, AND ONLY A THIN VENEER OF MERCHANTS AND TECHNOCRATS HAVE BEGUN TO FIND NEW WAYS OF CONSIDERING WOMAN'S ROLE. NOR HAVE THEY COME VERY FAR - BY OUR STANDARDS. BUT WE SUBMIT THAT WE CANNOT MEASURE PROGRESS, OR LACK OF IT, IN THIS MOST PURITANICAL OF MUSLIM STATES BY OUR STANDARDS. WE SHOULD LOOK, RATHER, AT WHERE THEY HAVE COME FROM, AND WHERE THEY ARE GOING.

5. CLEARLY, SOME SMALL PROGRESS IS BEING MADE IN EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA. WOMEN NOW APPEAR ON TELEVISION, AND WOMEN ARE HIRED IN JOBS IN WHICH THERE IS SOME PUBLIC CONTACT (SUCH AS RECEPTIONISTS, TELEPHONE

OPERATORS, ETC.). THE SHOCK HAS DIMINISHED WITH TIME AND THE INFLUX OF (COMPARATIVELY) MOBILE AND FREE EXPATRIATE WIVES. THE INCREASING EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF SAUDI WOMEN THEMSELVES WILL ALSO PLAY A ROLE. MOST OF THE WORKING WOMEN NOW ARE FOREIGNERS - WORKING OFTEN ILLEGALLY. BUT THE COUNTRY NEEDS THEIR SKILLS, AND THOSE OF SAUDI WOMEN, AND THE OFFICIAL ATTITUDE IS GENERALLY TO ACQUIESCE IN A GREATER ROLE FOR WOMEN. THE CURRENT PROBLEMS ARE UNDOUBTEDLY A STEP BACKWARD. BUT WE DOUBT IF THEY WILL PERSIST (THE ADVICE FROM SAUDIS WE HAVE TALKED TO IS TO WAIT IT OUT), AND WHEN THEY PASS THE WAY WILL BE OPEN FOR A FEW MORE SMALL STEPS FORWARD.

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